

Pam Wojcik, Sheedy Speech

Hi. I am speaking from the Browning Cinema in the DeBartolo Performing Arts Center. I wanted to speak here, because this is where much of my teaching has happened over the last two decades, and also because I wanted to mark and record what teaching looks like this year, during the pandemic. ~~You have the view my remote students have had. As you can see (adjust camera);~~ **But technology betrayed us and we could not use the setup that would have shown you the room and the view that students have had.** I have a few friends here today as well as my husband Rick Wojcik, all seated distantly and wearing masks. Thanks to all who came today virtually or in person. I hope that some future Sheedy winner looks at this and has to ask, “What the heck was going on?” or “Oh, yeah, remember that weird time when we all had to wear masks and couldn’t stand near each other?” rather than thinking, “Oh, that is when it started.”

Thank you Sarah for that kind introduction, and thanks to Jason. I really appreciate your gracious words. Following in your footsteps is truly an honor. I want to also thank the Sheedy committee: whatever mysterious group selects the Sheedy winner through whatever mysterious process. I don’t know how or why you picked me, but thank you very much.

I am very honored and humbled to receive this award. Having sat on the Provost’s Advisory Committee the last three years, I know that Notre Dame walks-the-walk when it says it cares about teaching. I look around me at Notre Dame, especially the College of Arts and Letters, and see so many amazing teachers. I am honored to be among previous Sheedy winners like Jason, Richard Pierce in Africana Studies, and numerous colleagues from Gender Studies including Marisel Moreno, Jessica Collett, Julia Douthwaite, and Gail Bederman, and my FTT colleagues Peter Holland and Jim Collins. I also want to acknowledge FTT colleagues who have

won Joyce and Kaneb awards – including Susan Ohmer, Siiri Scott, and Kevin Dreyer. They are all role models.

When the award was announced, many people contacted me or commented on Facebook and said it was “Well deserved.” While I was grateful for the sentiment, inside I thought, “How do you know if it is well-deserved or not?” Despite the fact that the primary job we have is teaching, outside of the review process for tenure and promotion, we rarely see each other teach. We see each other in meetings, or giving talks, and some people can see our student evaluations, but we do not always have ready access to what happens in the classroom.

College teaching is an odd profession. For the most part – and maybe this has changed, I certainly hope so -- nobody teaches graduate students to teach. Instead, we train them as researchers and hire them on the basis of their research. Having proved ourselves to be good students, we are assumed to be able to teach. It is a bit like being asked to be a chef just because you are a good eater, with no test to see if you can cook, or have even the most rudimentary knowledge of how to chop an onion. **Share screen**

So, we pick it up on the streets, or in my case the movies **slide, click 7**.

I am still waiting for my students to serenade me, by the way.

The only formal training I had was from Joe Williams and Larry McInerney at the University of Chicago, who ran a writing program with the unfortunate name of The Little Red Schoolhouse. This was a reader-response method of teaching writing. Through them, I taught undergrads, law students, students in public policy, and even a think tank on medical ethics for doctors. I use the methods they taught me every day in my own writing and in every class I teach, much to the chagrin of my students who may think that my obsession with creating a problem for their essay to solve, and structuring paragraph points, borders on the obsessive.

Besides that, I learned from my mentors:

Terry Tyler at Wellesley College, whose passion made me want to love and know Coleridge and Samuel Johnson as much as he did, and whose wry good humor conveyed the deep pleasure of academic work.

Corey Creekmur at the University of Chicago, who combined limitless knowledge and generosity. He took a passing comment I made in class and handed it back to me as my dissertation topic. He was, and is, endlessly curious and showed me that you never stop being a student.

Miriam Hansen at the University of Chicago demanded rigor in thought and writing, and she conveyed a deep sense of the unquestionable importance of film studies. She scared me to death, and I loved it. She is still sometimes the voice in my head when I write.

I also learned from my colleagues here at Notre Dame. I had the great good fortune to co-teach with Chris Becker, Barbara Green, and Jim Collins.

Chris has a deep respect for students and an enviable ability to meet them where they are, with a constant connection to the now of their lives.

Barbara has a remarkable ability to have students engage at a very high level and develop a brilliant conversation from just a few prompts. She works tirelessly, but makes it all feel spontaneous.

Jim is absolutely brilliant, dazzling, an artist at the blackboard. He takes the students on dizzying rides to intellectual sites they could not have predicted, raising the bar for the students, and making them want to reach that height.

I also learned from my students, too numerous to name. Their passion, their engagement, their questions, their humor, and their openness to me helped me approach subjects anew every

time, and their frustrations and failures also helped me figure out how to reframe things and try again.

After 22 years, I am still a bit surprised to even be here at Notre Dame, let alone win the Sheedy. I am not an obvious fit for Notre Dame. I have no interest in football. For my job talk, I gave a presentation on queer camp performance focused on the British *Carry On* comedies and the actor Kenneth Williams. I wanted to be sure they knew what they were getting if they hired me. **slide** I am eternally grateful to Don Crafton who hired me and who has been one of my greatest boosters and supporters ever since. Early student evaluations would often say, “She is a feminist,” and that was clearly meant to be a negative. **Slide** I was once named one of the “three professors you should avoid” taking classes from by the conservative student newspaper *The Irish Rover* – a commendation for which I was, and am, very proud. I have, *cough*, not always been in step with the administration or University policies.

Despite my seeming ill fit, Notre Dame has been very good to me. My research has always been supported and I have been given great freedom in designing courses. I was given the privilege of directing the Gender Studies program for six years and now Chair the Department of Film, TV and Theatre. I received ISLA and Henkels funds to run multiple Gender Studies conferences, as well as a long running annual undergraduate film studies conference that has since become part of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, and one at the London Gateway on London and Film. I have found communities of scholars and friends on campus, and Notre Dame has become home to me.

My research and teaching dwells in the detritus of film culture. **Slide** I can and do teach what are considered greats of cinema – auteurist films by Hitchcock, Welles, Murnau, Chaplin, Wilder, Preminger, Ozu – but I sandwich them amidst Rock Hudson and Doris Day comedies,

Shirley Temple films, Sinatra movies, teen films like *Gidget*, westerns, weepies, horror films, flapper films, rockumentaries, lots and lots of musicals, and the odd Marvel film. My classes are ones that I imagine some parents question when they get their \$50K bill.

I don't usually teach classes that are exact matches for my research, though my classes touch on the broader theoretical investments around my work: questions of genre, gender, performance, and space. But both my research and teaching engage film historically, to examine films not as a reflection of society but as discursive objects that negotiate and transmute the contemporary. When my students write papers, I push them to ask "So what?" "What's at stake?" "Why does it matter?" I believe that film matters, profoundly. Films can show the dominant cultural imaginary, and also its failings and crisis points; or, slightly refiguring and adapting a lovely phrase by Lauren Berlant, who was another inspirational teacher, film can be "a domain of revelation where a . . . scene of living that has been muffled in ordinary consciousness is revealed . . . like ants scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock." Film can also work as counter hegemonic discourse, critiquing the dominant and showing alternatives. I hope to encourage my students to resist and question. For those who go on to make media, I hope that they might make media that questions the dominant as well.

The culture on campus has changed in many ways in the years I have been here. Students are more open to discussions of gender, sexuality, race and class, and also more open to being nerds. At the same time, I worry about the way that education has become a commodity and college risks becoming a trade school. As a student, I was allowed to drift and discover my interests. Now, students view every class as a path to the future, a box to be checked in a march to a career. They double major, add a minor, and leave no room for play. Forced to think of every class as a pathway, every hobby as enrichment, every minute of time as billable hours to

be charged against future success, they are a lot more anxious. Advising students, I have become the old hippie trying to talk them out of double majoring, or trying to send them to take art history or music; because it will make them better film and theater makers, sure, but also because it will make them better people, a message that seems very strange to them.

This is a particularly apt year to reflect on teaching. COVID 19 has revealed inequities among our students that we usually deny or that are obscured by the seeming sameness of their lives in dorms, and in our classrooms. Anti-racist movements have revealed how far we have to go to address deep rifts in our society and our classrooms; and inequities in how our BIPOC students and colleagues experience the university are now magnified. COVID has also revealed inequities in how parents and women experience academic life, as parents, especially women, have been visibly hampered in their ability to do research and teaching because they are juggling kids at home. But, of course, these issues are not new.

From my experience, I can speak to the fact that for a long time, parents, and particularly women faculty, have had to act as if having kids does not impact their lives. Asking for any accommodation in terms of class times or meetings was seen as weakness or a lack of commitment. Similarly, anyone who might have questioned the need for in person meetings due to parental obligations or commuting has felt judged and found wanting. I have been a commuter for 22 years, and, until very recently, that option was looked down upon. People may question the commitment of parents or commuters. But when I was a mom, with two kids under ten, running the Gender Studies program, driving 100 miles each way to work, often in terrifying snowstorms, and frequently having to bring those kids with me because their school breaks never ever matched up with mine, nobody should have questioned my commitment. (And many thanks to Linnie Caye in Gender Studies who helped occupy my kids with crayons so I could go teach

my classes, and to the many students who babysat them on campus. And thanks to my kids, Sam and Ned, for taking those rides and being a part of my life here at Notre Dame as well as at home.)

This is not just about me. Many of my colleagues are parents and/or commuters and have had to work extra hard to seem like those are not complicating factors: driving four hours round-trip to meetings that last an hour; being asked to come to campus on days they don't teach and don't have daycare; asked to meet early in the morning or late in the day when childcare demands are highest; and being unable to refuse, because they needed to match expectations that did not consider their needs at all, without anyone stopping to ask why those expectations were in place and whether they were actually important. And my colleagues have all had to juggle these demands in departments that were much less pliant than mine, where I had very sympathetic feminist chairs in Don Crafton, Peter Holland, and Jim Collins. I also had a husband, Rick Wojcik, who adjusted his work schedule to complement mine, so he could pick the kids up from school and make dinner, an option not available to all co-parents. One hopes that, post COVID, we can be more open to scheduling meetings online, accommodating caregiving needs, recognizing the fact that having a life does not negate being committed.

COVID also makes us reflect on teaching and its importance: as we have all had to consider whether and how it is worth the risk to teach in person amidst a pandemic. I certainly do not think coming to school should be compared to going to war, and I do not think we send students to college to test their mettle or risk their lives in the way war might. I do think it is important for them to test their mettle in other ways; to help them become autonomous, to discover aspects of themselves they could not see otherwise, to forge connections with people they may not have met otherwise, and to expand their knowledge and open their minds. That is

why all of us who were able opened ourselves to risk this semester, to forge those connections and open those doors.

COVID also forces us to reflect on how to teach. This summer I attended multiple Kaneb sessions, and, as department Chair, organized workshops with faculty in my department to think about best practices for Zoom, how to manage the dreaded dual delivery, how to do interactive work with masks and distance, how to address anti-racism by rethinking syllabi and classroom dynamics. These conversations were delightful and invigorating, as we do not often focus on what we do. I mean, we grumble, we complain, we talk about how much we have to do, how many papers to grade, but we do not often discuss what we do in the room, how we do it, or how we might do it better. These reflective practices are something I hope we can continue.

My fear in the context of COVID is that education risks getting reduced to content delivery. Certainly, pre-recorded lectures and asynchronous learning have been vital, particularly for those offering classes exclusively online. They help meet the needs of students in different times zones or without consistent access to Wi-Fi, or those who are sick, and they help lessen the exhaustion attendant upon constant Zooming. And, certainly, a Google form or Forum post on Sakai can be a useful way to have students reflect on readings and prepare between live class meetings. The Kaneb Center and the OIT have done a fantastic job helping us all learn how to make engaging asynchronous material. However, if we think of teaching as merely content delivery, we lose a great deal. Many things can be taught by video: such as how to make a sourdough starter or fix your car, a spin class on a Peleton app, or maybe a Masterclass in those crucial onion cutting skills.

Slide

But those modes are not sufficient to explain why and how the musical produces a utopian feeling; what constitutes a genre; how Hollywood casting practices have marginalized racial and ethnic others; how cinema helped negotiate the effects of modernity or changing gender roles; why a female star produces a strong feeling of identification for the gay community; what investments in home have been navigated thru cinema; what cinema means as a collective experience; how cinema moves us; or the myriad other things that cinema invites us to reflect upon. That, for me, requires dialogue, asking questions, and thinking through something together.

Content delivery is not a conversation. And conversation is at the heart of teaching.

In my classes, I often have students do an exercise at the end of the semester in which they write a document labelled “What I Think I Know Now About The Movie Musical,” or film theory or Sinatra or teen film, and so on. This exercise helps them reflect on what they will actually take away from the course, rather than what the final exam may ask, and I hope it provides an account they can refer to later. For me, it is valuable to show what they learned and how they processed the class. As I received this award, I have been thinking a lot about “What I Think I Know Now About Teaching.”

I know that if a class isn't working it is me, not them.

I know that teaching is about being responsive. This means being responsive to the temperature in the room, such as the anxiety our students have been experiencing during COVID, and to ways students may feel about a film or a reading or a conversation. It means being responsive to turns in the conversation that I did not predict or want; responsive to ways that student may receive films and readings differently from me, such as situations where a film that I never thought about as racist or sexist or homophobic may appear so to my students. These

moments may provide a teaching opportunity, to dig in and question why it seems that way now, and why it may not have before, or to historicize something and see that it may be more complex or contradictory than it appears. In some cases, this may deepen our understanding of a text, or of how racism or sexism or homophobia work as forms of implicit bias or presumption. In other cases, it may make me rethink a text and find that I can replace it easily; and that, to get where I need to go, I may not need to traverse past prejudices.

I know that my course is a small piece of my students' ecosystem, that they are overloaded, and that it is not my job to demand more space but to make my space a positive experience and a safe harbor. This doesn't mean gutting my course, or not demanding rigor, but knowing that rigor needs to be balanced by empathy and flexibility.

I know that meeting students where they are does not mean lowering expectations, but figuring out their starting point, so I can help them move forward. And I know that every student has a different starting point.

I know that some days will be better than others.

I know that I am still learning.

Having taught for 25 years full time, 22 here at Notre Dame, I now know how to cut an onion, but I am still working on becoming a chef. Thank you.